

## Bonnie Schwartz, "Casts of Thousands" Brooklyn Bridge, September 1996

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Sculpture and environmental activist Deborah Masters is passionate about two things: making art for public spaces and working on a monumental scale. No wonder the 45-year-old artist, known for her cast-concrete pieces, lives and works in a 5,500-square-foot-loft on Water Street, in the DUMBO section of Brooklyn. She needs the space.

It was Masters who created "Pond Virgins," that distinctive collection of stylized, eight-foot-tall figures that inhabited Prospect Park a few years back. (The installation, unfortunately, was destroyed by drunken teenagers wielding sledgehammers.) Her more recent work, titled "Coney Island Reliefs," is even more ambitious. Masters, commissioned by the Metropolitan Transit Authority's Arts for Transit program, has created a series of 128 giant reliefs depicting the unusual characters who call Coney Island home.

The 12-ton work-Masters mixed and poured the concrete with a crew of assistants- is to be installed in the architectural recesses of the Ocean Parkway Viaduct, transforming it into a celebratory gateway. Visitors driving both to and from Coney Island won't be able to miss it, nor will people arriving at the Ocean Parkway D-train subway station.

The sculpture is reminiscent in scale and style of the Works Progress Administration commissions of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Unfortunately, it probably won't be installed until at least the year 2000: The ocean Parkway Viaduct needs major repairs. A fluke water leak rusted the rebar- the structure's steel skeleton- and now the viaduct cannot support the additional weight. So, for the next four years, Masters' exuberant piece will be shuttered inside a city-owned bus depot in the Bronx, collecting dust.

Masters is somewhat used to having her art vandalized; in addition to "Pond Virgins," two of her earlier public sculptures were also attacked. But the deterioration of the viaduct was an unexpected and deeply disappointing event. "It was like having a baby born dead, or born with something so wrong with it that you wish it would die," says Masters of the sculpture, which took two years to fabricate. The piece was commissioned for \$70,000 but ended up costing some \$40,000 more, with the artist herself making up the difference with personal loans. "But everybody at the MTA has been so nice to me about it, there's nobody I can get mad at."

Any artist interested in creating public or site-specific art can register to participate in the MTA's Arts for Transit program, created in 1985 to help revitalize the transit system. Most of what the problem has commissioned to date has been installed inside subway stations. But when Masters inspected the site for which she had been chosen, the Ocean Parkway station, her first inclination was to run.

"The station was so claustrophobic, and I didn't want to spend much time in there," she says. "When I went outside and looked at the bridge, I fell in love with it. It has these

gorgeous, terribly expensive inlaid tiles that nobody ever notices. It was also one of the first cast-concrete bridges built in the city under Olmsted's influence."

Masters, who has degrees in art from both Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania and the New York Studio School in Manhattan, is referring to Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect and parks commissioner who in the late 1800s designed, among other things, Prospect Park and Central Park. "I knew when I saw the architectural recesses in the [viaduct]," she continues, "that they were meant to be filled."

A native of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Masters first learned how to cast concrete from her father, a civil engineer. (She would later learn more nuances about the process from Italian artisans living in Brooklyn.) It was her mother who taught her to appreciate the environment. Masters has long been an environmental activist. She was founder and co-director of the Fort Green/Waterfront Coalition for Clean Air, as well as a member of the Health and Social Services Committee Board 2. Currently she is director of the Watchperson Project, a Greenpoint/Williamsburg environmental initiative.

Believing strongly that "for public art to be successful, it has to relate to the environment in which it exists," Masters began hanging out in Coney Island, getting to know some of the people who live there. For three weeks, she interviewed, sketched and photographed Latino gang members, park-bench derelicts, Russian émigrés, Polar Bear Club swimmers, you name it.

Images of many of these folk ended up in the reliefs, along with more traditional seaside icons such as mermaids and Neptune. "When my mother first saw some of the sketches," says Masters, "She said, 'Why did you include all of those fat ladies?' I think she was offended that people she would consider overweight were comfortable sunbathing in bikinis. But I drew and sculpted what I found. That's what Coney Island is all about: how weird everyone is, and also how everyone is there just to have a good time."

Masters is not sitting around while the MTA scrambles to find the funds to repair the Ocean Parkway Viaduct. She has already begun work on her next massive piece, "Twentieth Century Icons," which focuses on religious iconography. It doesn't have a home yet either.

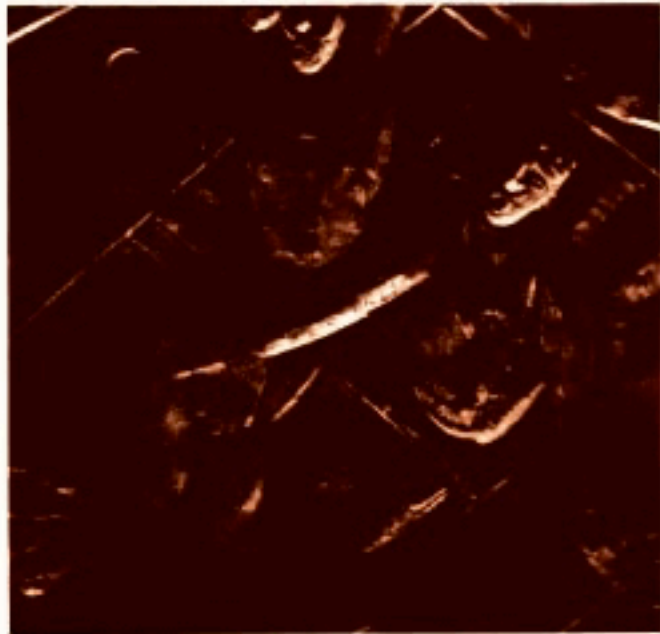
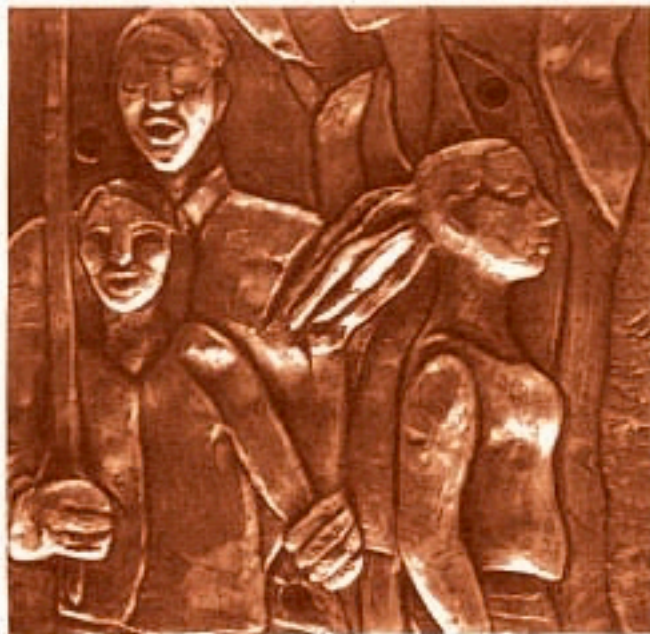
Photographs:

FOR YOUR AMUSEMENT: Highlights from Masters' 128 "Coney Island Reliefs."

MASTERS'S CASTING PLACE: Cement friezes harden in the Beard Street pier in Red Hook (above); the Ocean Parkway Viaduct (top) requires structural repairs before it is ready for Masters' MTA creation.

# BROOKLYN BRIDGE

SEPTEMBER 1996 \$2.75



## SCULPTURE

### Casts of thousands

By Bonnie Schwartz

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